

# *Vivian and Her Son*

The forty days had passed, each adding what felt like a year to her life, and things had finally quieted down. This was the first morning that Vivian had been able to wake up to her empty house. She felt strange yet relieved to be alone. For the past forty days, her home had been flooded by people whose stated intent was to make her life easier by keeping her house clean, preparing the coffee for the mourners, greeting the guests, choosing which black dress she would wear that day, doing her hair up in the morning, and undoing it as they tucked her in her bed at night.

Vivian had not resisted. Although she had wanted to be alone from the moment she had heard of the car accident which had resulted in her son's death, she knew that solitude was a luxury women in her situation could not afford in a world of compassionate relatives and friends who were eager to appease, comfort, and take charge. It seemed to her that whenever she would try to say something, she would suddenly be surrounded by a swarm of coarse black dresses that brushed against her body, eager arms that pulled her to heavy breasts, sweaty palms that caressed her cheeks—wiping off invisible tear—and shrills of pity and compassion that echoed in her ears, silencing her own voice by reminding her that she was helpless to fight against her surroundings. As if that were not enough, she was also scared to open her mouth for fear of various barbiturates being stuffed down her throat, followed by a hot liquid that tasted much too bitter to be coffee.

She had thus surrendered in her fight to be alone. She, who had always refused to let anyone make her decisions or intrude on

her privacy, had come to accept the fact that she had become much like a new toy in the hands of a depraved child. The only time she had had to be with herself was when she went to the bathroom. Yet even that precious moment had been disturbed by discreet knocks on the bathroom door, announcing the arrival of new guests or the departure of old ones.

Sitting amid the mourners, gazing at unrecognizable black figures that came and went, she had wondered why her desire for privacy had been denied. At such moments, her mind would fill with questions: Why are they afraid to leave me alone? Do they think I am totally helpless? Don't they realize that strength has always been within myself, not something I have acquired and absorbed from others? What are all these ceremonies doing for me or for my Omar? Are they here to comfort me or to make an appearance? Who is that woman in the Yves Saint Laurent dress and golden jewelry anyway? I've never seen her before in my life, yet she is smiling at me as if we had been brought up together. Does she think she is giving me strength? Why is she in my home when she didn't even know my son? And who are those two women whispering to each other in the corner? They must be the wives of those two men whom I can hear talking about the bad state of the economy in the adjoining room. And who are these men anyway? Business acquaintances of Majdi's, no doubt, hoping to make an impression and slide in business talk during his weak moments. What is Najwa Zabaneh doing here? The last time I saw her was a year ago at the CISV meeting and all she did was contradict every suggestion I made. Well, she looks like she's enjoying the food, at least.

Then her mind would turn to questions that she did not—could not—deal with amid strangers. These always began with *Why* and were always interrupted by someone or something. It was as if they waited for the moment she began to think of Omar to ask her a question or involve her in a debate. She had concluded that if she wished to be left out of their conversations, all she had to do was not think of the questions she needed to deal with most of all. At first, she had not wanted to ask them herself, so she had welcomed the fact that she was forbidden to do so. Her compliance, however, had slowly turned to silent rage as she realized that she was no longer the mistress of her own house, or of her own mind. She felt more frustrated at the fact that her thoughts were

being controlled and monitored than at seeing her furniture rearranged, her kitchen turned upside down, and her bedroom transformed into a prison that was heavily guarded by her sister and cousins every night.

Throughout the forty days, she had remained quiet, rarely crying and moving her limbs only when it was really necessary. She knew that by withholding the spectacle they had all come to witness, she would score a small victory for herself and for her son whom none of them had ever known. She thus refused to give them the satisfaction of seeing her tears whenever she was able to hold them back. They would be disappointed if they expected to see the grieving mother shriek and tear her clothes to shreds. She had decided to rob them of that image the way they had robbed her of herself when she needed herself the most. Her loss was hers, and hers alone, and she felt insulted every time someone pretended to understand what she herself knew could never be understood or accepted.

This had been her story in this country, a life of constant struggling against what most others had understood and accepted. This was the only way she knew to rebel against oppression, and although she understood that the mourners surrounding her did so with good intentions, she could not forgive them for their blindness in this kind of situation which she saw as another form of submission to those roles they felt they were assigned in life.

Nevertheless, she was aware that many must have commented on the dryness in her eyes. In her mind, she could hear the whispers by the women in black as clearly as if they were speaking directly in her ear:

“Strong woman, that Um Omar. Has rarely shed a tear, did you notice?”

“She’s always been like that, almost as if she were born with something that the rest of us women do not have.”

“I’ve always said that she should have been born a man. When I used to see her driving all around town in her car, speeding and overtaking every car in the street, I often remarked that she drove like a man.”

“It must be the way she was brought up. These girls who have been educated in universities and who have traveled abroad always seem to have a spirit that is different from ours. I am not belittling her grief, but I think that she will survive this tragedy with relative

ease. Had it been my son, God forbid, I would not even have had the strength to sit on a chair and welcome the mourners. They would have heard my wailing in China."

"It's true, she has never been the typical mother or wife for that matter. Always running around and never staying at home. She even dressed differently. I don't think she ever had time to cook, with her job and all. I always wondered how her husband put up with it!"

"I never understood why she worked in the first place. It's not as if they need the money or anything. But I guess when you travel abroad without your husband often enough, you're bound to get ideas. I mean, when you're used to foreign goods, local products just won't do."

"I always said *Better the dung of your country than the jewels of the foreigner*. Still, I am sure she must be in pain. After all, he was her older son. Thank God she has another one to keep her going. Otherwise, she would not have been this silent."

Yet there had been one occasion when she had spoken out, in spite of the restrictions, the barbiturates, and the deafening commotion. It happened one evening after the mourners had left, leaving Vivian with her sister and three cousins who were in the habit of spending the night at her house. That night, while Vivian was lying down, her eyes focused on the Valium bottle at her bedside, she heard the door to Omar's room being opened. She jumped to her feet and, feeling dizzy and nauseous, took a moment to catch her breath. Then she stammered into the hallway where her cousins and sister were just about to enter her son's room.

"Where are you going?" she inquired, as if in a dream.

"Vivian!" replied her cousins in chorus, "you should be resting, dear. Come with us, we'll take you back to bed."

But just as the black dresses began to engulf her, suffocating her voice as usual, she raised her hand in a motion that made them startle.

"No," she cried. "Enough is enough!"

Maybe it was her sudden movement, maybe it was the flicker in her eye, or maybe it was simply that they hadn't heard her speak out until then, but for the first time, the women in black stepped back.

The sister then attempted to explain.

"We were just trying to make it easier on you, dear. We thought we'd spare you the misery."

to come out.

"If spare me you must, then close that door at once. This is the one room in this house that is off-limits to you all. I will let you spare me, since you feel that I must be spared, but you will not rob me of all I have left of him."

With these words, she walked back to her room, hearing the door to her son's room shutting behind her.

Today was the forty-first day, and it was suddenly all over. Her husband had gone to work in the morning, her younger son had gone to school, and even her sister and cousins, who had been sleeping at her house for the past forty days, had reluctantly gone back to work. She finally had the day to herself, and her ears were already beginning to adjust to the silence around her, although they still buzzed occasionally with the sound of the past forty days.

She thought of taking a Valium but decided against it, remembering the way pills had been poured into her system over the past several weeks. She sat down in an armchair overlooking the back garden, closed her eyes, and tried to experience the luxury of solitude. To her surprise, she found that she could not. The silence around her seemed more deafening than the *sug* which had been her life lately and for a second, she almost wished that there would be someone there to speak and break the ringing in her ears.

She had thought that when this moment finally came, she would feel liberated. She had assumed that she would break down in tears, cry out in anger, then proceed to get rid of every mention of God in the house. Instead, she found herself feeling numb, and could not recall how to cry. All she knew, all she felt, was that she did not want to go on. It seemed to her that although she had had to fight for survival all of her life, this was one battle she could not win. For the first time in her life, she had no interest in struggling against oppression and injustice. Omar's death had completely severed all ties with the woman she had always been, the one who had organized, demonstrated, and fought for local issues ranging from the unveiling of women to equal educational opportunities for all.

Being alone in the house, she decided that it was time to enter Omar's room. She stood in front of the door, stared at the "Private Property" sign he had posted on the outside, and felt strange at being able to enter without the need to listen in or knock first. She nevertheless stood there, imagining what it would be like to go in

and not find him in the room where he had spent most of his life. It seemed to her that, with the exception of the time she had walked in to find him on his bed, his underwear beside him and a magazine in his hand, he was always lying on his bed reading, sitting at his desk writing, or speaking on the phone.

She would knock, come in, and try yet again to convince him that *abundance is the brother of deprivation*.

"But, mom," he would say, "what possible harm could there be in my sitting and reading today?"

"Nothing," she would reply, "except that it's so nice outside and you should go out for some fresh air. Why don't you take the car for a drive or something?"

"Because I don't have a driver's license, and because I don't like to drive."

"But I'm offering you the use of the car! Take it! Boys your age fight with their parents to let them use the car, and we have to beg you to take it!"

"I don't care about boys my age, mother, and if you feel cooped up in the house, why don't you take the car for a drive?"

"All right," she would reply, attempting to ignore his question, "if you don't want to take the car, then why not go out into the neighborhood? All your friends are outside and when they saw me pulling into the driveway, they asked me where you were."

At this point, she could always note a strange gleam in his eyes, and she never knew if it was anger or fear.

"And what did you tell them?" he would inquire.

"The usual," she would sigh, "that you had a lot of homework and that you were not feeling well."

Her answer would always appease him, and he would look down on the page of his opened book.

"Omar, you know we are very proud of you because you are always reading and writing. God knows I wish your brother would open a book once in his life without being forced to. But you are taking it to the extreme. You stay in your room and your father and I forget that you are even here. It's not healthy to lock yourself away from humanity!"

"Mom," he would say, looking away, "you just don't understand. I am happy here. I am happiest reading a book. I've never gotten along with people my age, you know that. Why do you have to make me feel guilty? Why do you hate to see me happy?"

At that moment, she would realize that it was hopeless. Yet,

she felt that as his mother, she could not just abandon him to his self-inflicted prison. She would therefore attempt a compromise.

"Why don't we go then to the bookshop in Shmeisani?" she would ask.

At this suggestion, he would usually spring up, grab his jacket, and be waiting at the door for her to get ready. He would then go into her room, lie on the bed, and watch her as she applied her makeup. Then that annoying question would come: "Mom, why don't you try putting on more makeup today?"

In responding to such questions, she would try to hide the feeling of discomfort that would overtake her.

"You know I don't wear much makeup. I don't like it. Anyway, shall we go?"

He would seem frustrated and disappointed at her response, and would gaze at her with his *Why can't we pursue this conversation any longer* look.

As they walked toward the car, she would sometimes wonder what exactly it was that she did wrong, why she couldn't give up trying, and why it was that her son was the only sixteen-year-old in the country that had to be different. Then she would wonder why, in spite of it all, she still felt proud of him.

"Do you want to drive?" she would say, handing him the keys.

"Sure."

Then she would hope that the reason he agreed to drive was that he wanted to show off in front of the neighborhood kids, not because he wanted to please her.

She suddenly noticed that she had been standing inside his bedroom looking at his empty bed and could not recall how she got there. She then realized that today, there would be no drive to the Shmeisani book shop, no convincing to do, and no frustration to feel. The thought seemed more painful to her than anything she had felt in the past forty days.

She looked at the framed black-and-white picture on his desk. It was a picture of her holding him when he was one year old—holding him so close that he seemed to be gasping for air. She wondered why it was, that of all the pictures they had of him as a baby, he had chosen that particular one to frame. Was he trying to tell her something? Had she clutched on to him so much that she had suffocated him in the process?

"I held you too tightly, my son," she said aloud, and her tears

finally came. "Now I'm expected to just let you go, to just give up. How can I let go now, when I couldn't let go then? How was it possible that you, a sixteen-year-old Jordanian boy, could understand me when no one else would? Why was it that when I felt life treading upon me and ridiculing my existence, I turned to you? Why did you leave, my son; was it to get away from me and my problems? Am I to blame for not leaving you be?"

She put the frame down, and looked around the room. She suddenly expected to hear him come in and ask her what she was doing in his room when he wasn't there.

"You never understood that I had to protect you from those bastards, those emotionless fools who had turned my life to hell. I know what it's like, my son, to be the odd one out, the one they stare at, the one they ridicule. But I also know that in this world of ours, frailty cannot be tolerated in those you love. What mother can stand still and watch her son being devoured? What kind of person would I be if I had just let you be without passing on to you the strength I had taken years to accumulate? Maybe I was too tough but maybe, just maybe, you understood. I should have told you, my Omar, that I understood, that I knew what you were trying to hide from me and from yourself. I should have told you that I would love you no matter what you were."

Her tears were now flowing as if to compensate for forty days and forty nights of self-imposed drought.

"I knew, my darling, I knew. You may have been clever but you could never fool me. I don't know why I wasn't able to accept, to understand. It was not pride and reputation, as you must have assumed; it was love. I couldn't bear to watch you suffer the way I had in this country. I wanted to help you avoid the looks, the insults, and the death sentence that they have hung upon my head.

"You never lived like other boys your age. Why should I have expected you to die as they do, after their mothers are already gone? Why was I surprised to hear that you left us when I knew you had done so years ago? Why wasn't I able to understand, to let you know that I knew, that everything would turn out all right because, although you and I would always be oppressed, we acquire a strength that makes their insults bounce off and a vision that they could never hope to have."

She opened his desk drawer and, with experienced hands, reached toward the inner right hand corner and took out the Diary.

She opened it to the last entry but it was not anything she had not read before. Then, she placed the Diary in her coat pocket and left the room, closing the door behind her as quietly as she could.

Once in the back garden, she chose a secluded place beneath the large tree that overshadowed the far right corner of the garden. There, she took out the Diary and placed it on the soil. Then, she took out the bottle of kerosene and sprayed it liberally on the pages, making sure that each page got its fair share of liquid. The odor nauseated her, reminding her of the time when she had walked into the bathroom years ago to find Omar, who was four years old at the time, holding a bottle of kerosene in his hand, ready to drink it. She had rushed to him, taken the bottle away, and slapped him on the hand, telling him that this was not something to drink. Since then, she had stopped putting the kerosene bottles beneath the sink and began stacking them in a closet next to the fireplace where they would be used in the winter to keep the flames ablaze.

The thought of what would have happened if she had not walked into the bathroom at that moment made her shudder. Then she remembered the reason she was out in the back garden and noted the irony that had plagued her relationship with her son from the very beginning. She struck a match, threw it forward, and watched the Diary turn into flames.

As she stared at the blaze that had once been her son's life, the tears welled up in her eyes, but she did not step back in spite of the heat and the odor. Through the thick and hazy air that engulfed her, almost touching the hem of her coat, she noted that she was now smiling through her tears. She knew that now she had put him to rest; that all the ceremonies, rituals, and memorials of the past forty days had been nothing but a façade that had nothing to do with her or her son. She stood there a moment longer, watching the black soot mingle with the soil, and the burnt pages blow away in the breeze. Then she thought of the dress she would wear to greet her sister and cousins who would be coming to visit her and her husband that evening.